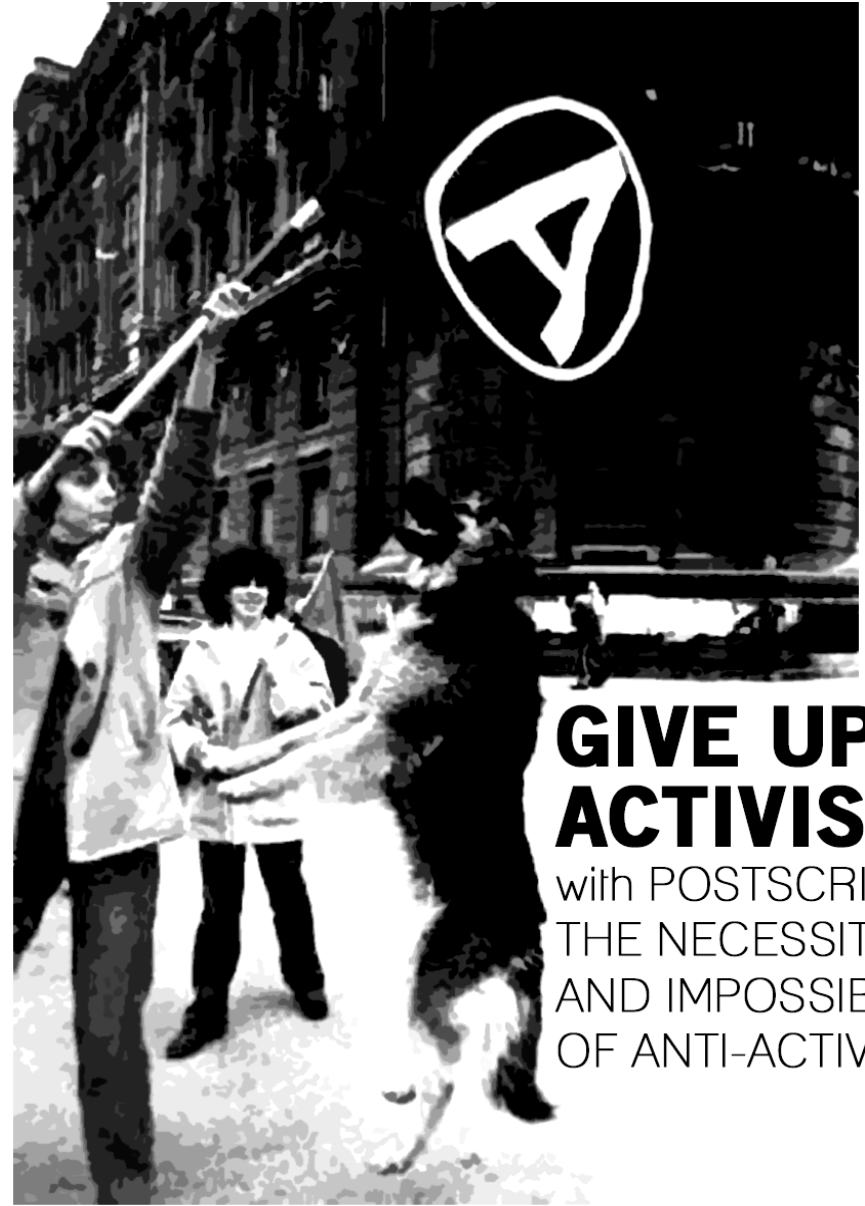




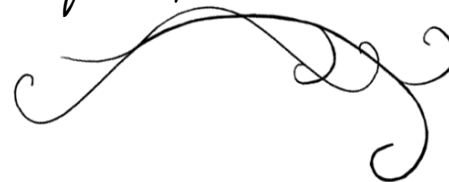
[falldistro@gmail.com](mailto:falldistro@gmail.com)



**GIVE UP  
ACTIVISM**  
with POSTSCRIPT &  
THE NECESSITY  
AND IMPOSSIBILITY  
OF ANTI-ACTIVISM



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own life as well as society in general. He represses the impulse which made him turn against society. He submits to revolutionary action as if it were external to him: it is fairly easy to see the moral character of this attitude. This was already wrong and conservative in the past; today it becomes increasingly reactionary." <<http://www.skatta.demon.co.uk/eclipse/eclips01.htm>>

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[2] This was addressed, however, in a good article in another publication out of Brighton, *undercurrent* #8, in their article "Practice and Ideology in the Direct Action Movement." Available at the *undercurrent* website: <<http://www.anti-capital.net/undercurrent>> or on the KKA website: <[http://www.geocities.com/kk\\_abacus/ioaa/pracideo.html](http://www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/ioaa/pracideo.html)>

[3] Unfortunately Price's anti-activist impulses lead him to shy away from acknowledging the necessity of his own theoretical efforts. At the end of his impressive article, he advances a proposal for networks of small groups organized around attention to "everyday" struggles, workers inquiries, and local newsletters incorporating the CLR James-style "full fountain pen" approach. But *Collective Action Notes* itself - as a publication and a project - stands distinctly outside the scope of Price's proposals. *CAN* is self-consciously "theoretical" and communicates mostly with various "militants" rather than with "ordinary workers" (whatever those might be). In other words, Price's proposals make no mention of this important aspect of *his own actual, concrete practice*. Why not? To be consistent, Price ought either to cease publishing *CAN* or else recast his proposals to make room for the theoretical work which, after all, he's already doing. (We certainly hope he chooses the latter option.)

[4] Let no one venture here on that silly-sinister etymology which equates "totality" with "totalitarian." Certainly I reject the idea that one's individual point of view can yield up some kind of absolute truth to which others must bow down. I think that we need to acknowledge that our efforts towards "totality" will necessarily be *radically incomplete approximations* which need to be complemented and contrasted by many others' theoretical approximations of "totality." But neither does that absolve us of the responsibility to make the effort. A certain amount of skepticism about the empirical status of the "big picture" is healthy, but may be taken to debilitating extremes. Ultimately, the real "totality" is the class itself, constituted in its practical movement rather than in a "program" or panoptic "world-view."

[5] Dauvé himself, in the Foreword to the original edition of *The Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement*, still affirms the necessity of this task: "In spite of its shortcomings, the Situationist International has shown - among other things - what Marx had explained more than 100 years ago: It is not only important to understand the historical movement and act accordingly, but also to be something different from the attitudes and values of the society the revolutionary wants to destroy. The militant attitude is indeed counter-revolutionary, in so far as it splits the individual into two, separating his needs, his real individual and social needs, the reasons why he cannot stand the present world, from his action, his attempt to change this world. The militant refuses to admit that he is in fact revolutionary because he needs to change his

and become leading cadre in the Workers Revolutionary Communist Vanguard League of Bolshevik-Leninist Internationalists.

Rather, one ought to continue to try to live differently, to function differently and in "non-alienated" and non-hierarchical ways in one's practice. But one should do this "as (and in) *tension*," all the while accepting *the functional impossibility of doing this successfully in the present*, of doing this in any but the most tentative and prefigurative - rather than fully realized or "non-alienated" - way.

To put it another way: I think there is much to be learned by hurling ourselves, again and again, against the bars of our cage. It is in our *necessary failures* as much as in our partial, modest, and always fragile successes that we learn how this society has crippled us, what it strips from us in terms of dignity and fulfilled desire. But we shouldn't pretend that we're liberated when we're not, which could only turn us into a priggish aristocracy of the "authentic" and "un-alienated."

The fact is that even the folks in the various groups which are trying to develop an "anti-activist" and "anti-political" approach to anticapitalist revolution--from KK/Collectivities in Faridabad, India to the Insubordinate collective in Baltimore--are *simultaneously* workers and "not-workers," workers and "activists," even workers and - horrors! - *intellectuals*. And the most dangerous thing for people in that position to do is to lose sight of their fundamentally *cleft* nature, their "dual" social existence, and pretend that they're "just" workers. Because then they will truly have no way to keep tabs on their "other" side and its inherently elitist potentialities. And then they'll begin to erect a new layer of social elites--this time under the rubric of the "anti-activist," of the "authentic," the "unalienated," the "real" proles. And all the old crap will come flooding back again.

**J. Kellstadt**

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## Notes

[1] The text of "Give Up Activism" can be found on the web at:<[http://www.geocities.com/kk\\_abacus/ioaa/guactivism.html](http://www.geocities.com/kk_abacus/ioaa/guactivism.html) or <[http://www.infoshop.org/octo/j18\\_reflections.html](http://www.infoshop.org/octo/j18_reflections.html)>

# GIVE UP ACTIVISM

*In 1999, in the aftermath of the June 18th global day of action, a pamphlet called Reflections on June 18th was produced by some people in London, as an open-access collection of "contributions on the politics behind the events that occurred in the City of London on June 18, 1999". Contained in this collection was an article called 'Give up Activism' which has generated quite a lot of discussion and debate both in the UK and internationally, being translated into several languages and reproduced in several different publications. Here we republish the article together with a new postscript by the author addressing some comments and criticisms received since the original publication.*

*One problem apparent in the June 18th day of action was the adoption of an activist mentality. This problem became particularly obvious with June 18th precisely because the people involved in organising it and the people involved on the day tried to push beyond these limitations. This piece is no criticism of anyone involved--rather an attempt to inspire some thought on the challenges that confront us if we are really serious in our intention of doing away with the capitalist mode of production.*

## Experts

By 'an activist mentality' what I mean is that people think of themselves primarily as activists and as belonging to some wider community of activists. The activist identifies with what they do and thinks of it as their role in life, like a job or career. In the same way some people will identify with their job as a doctor or a teacher, and instead of it being something they just happen to be doing, it becomes an essential part of their self-image.

The activist is a specialist or an expert in social change. To think of yourself as being an activist means to think of yourself as being somehow privileged or more advanced than others in your appreciation of the need for social change, in the knowledge of how to achieve it and as leading or being in the forefront of the practical struggle to create this change.

Activism, like all expert roles, has its basis in the division of labour--it is a specialised separate task. The division of labour is the foundation of class society, the fundamental division being that between mental and manual labour. The division of labour operates, for example, in medicine or education--instead of healing and bringing up kids being common knowledge and tasks that everyone has a hand in, this knowledge becomes the specialised property of doctors and teachers--experts that we must rely on to do these things for us. Experts jealously guard and mystify the skills they have. This keeps people separated and disempowered and reinforces hierarchical class society.

A division of labour implies that one person takes on a role on behalf of many others who relinquish this responsibility. A separation of tasks means that other people will grow your food and make your clothes and supply your electricity while you get on with achieving social change. The activist, being an expert in social change, assumes that other people aren't doing anything to change their lives and so feels a duty or a responsibility to do it on their behalf. Activists think they are compensating for the lack of activity by others. Defining ourselves as activists means defining \*our\* actions as the ones which will bring about social change, thus disregarding the activity of thousands upon thousands of other non-activists. Activism is based on this misconception that it is only activists who do social change--whereas of course class struggle is happening all the time.

### Form and Content

The tension between the form of 'activism' in which our political activity appears and its increasingly radical content has only been growing over the last few years. The background of a lot of the people involved in June 18th is of being 'activists' who 'campaign' on an 'issue'. The political progress that has been made in the activist scene over the last few years has resulted in a situation where many people have moved beyond single issue campaigns against specific companies or developments to a rather ill-defined yet nonetheless promising anti-capitalist perspective. Yet although the content of the campaigning activity has altered, the form of activism has not. So instead of taking on Monsanto and going to their headquarters and occupying it, we have now seen beyond the single facet of capital represented by Monsanto and so develop a 'campaign' against capitalism. And where better to go and occupy than what is perceived as being the headquarters of capitalism--the City?

Our methods of operating are still the same as if we were taking on a specific corporation or development, despite the fact that capitalism is not at all the same sort of thing and the ways in which one might bring down a particular company are not at all the same as the ways in which you might bring down

Vaneigem's book was a difficult work to produce because it *cannot be lived*, threatened with falling on the one hand into a marginal possibilism and on the other into an imperative which is unrealizable and thus moral. Either one huddles in the crevices of bourgeois society, or one ceaselessly opposes to it a different life which is impotent because only the revolution can make it a reality. The SI put the worst of itself into its worst text. Vaneigem was the weakest side of the SI, the one which reveals all its weaknesses. The positive utopia is revolutionary as demand, as tension, because it cannot be realized within this society: it becomes derisory when one tries to live it today.

Instead of revolutionary critique, argues Dauvé, Vaneigem slips into *moralism*, and "like every morality, Vaneigem's position was untenable and had to explode on contact with reality."

Dauvé goes on to spell out both the causes and the consequences of this moralism. The former he locates in the narrowing of the SI's perspective to the realm of appearance and consumption, at the expense of production. In its theorizing of the revolutionary movement, says Dauvé, "the SI does indeed start out from the real conditions of existence, but reduces them to intersubjective relations. This is the point of view of the subject trying to rediscover itself, not a view which encompasses both subject and object." I would argue that this is precisely the problem with Andrew X's critique of the activist, which likewise adopts only "the point of view of the subject trying to rediscover itself" rather than considering the subject in the context of its complex, objective social mediations.

According to Dauvé, the consequence of this exclusively subjective point of view was that the Situationist International became "an affirmation of individuals to the point of elitism." "Against militant moralism," writes Dauvé, "the SI extolled another morality: that of the autonomy of individuals in the social group and in the revolutionary group. Now, only an activity integrated into a social movement permits autonomy through an effective practice. Otherwise the requirement of autonomy ends up by creating an elite of those who know *how to make themselves autonomous*."

My own reading of Dauvé's position is to seize upon his assertion, quoted above, that within our present alienated society "positive utopia" can remain revolutionary "*as demand, as tension*." I take this to mean that the project of "living differently" is not simply to be discarded, tossed aside as simply impossible until "after the revolution," nor that we must simply resign ourselves to pursuing the "end of alienation" by "alienated means." [5] Thus we should not simply throw up our hands and unquestioningly fulfill the conventional role of activist or militant, nor should we swallow the whole pill

incontestable but constantly contested, this form makes appropriation a right belonging to everyone and from which everyone is excluded, a right one can obtain only by renouncing it. As long as it fails to break free of the context imprisoning it (a break that is called revolution), the most authentic experience can be grasped, expressed and communicated only by way of an inversion through which its fundamental contradiction is dissimulated. In other words, if a positive project fails to sustain a praxis of radically overthrowing the conditions of life -- which are nothing other than the conditions of private appropriation -- it does not have the slightest chance of escaping being taken over by the negativity that reigns over the expression of social relationships: it is coopted like an inverted mirror image.

I wish in particular to underline the importance of that last sentence: short of overthrowing "the conditions of private appropriation" themselves, all attempts at "authentic" and "un-alienated" existence will become simply another part of the spectacle. One's "positive project" - to stay with Vaneigem's terms - *must* "sustain a praxis of radically overthrowing the conditions of life," or else it won't stand "the slightest chance" of escaping alienation. The "break" that allows one to truly appropriate an authentic self is thus not "giving up activism," it is instead "a break that is called revolution"--which is necessarily the *collective* project of the oppressed. Activism can't be "given up" by the individual; it must be *superseded* in the collective process of overthrowing capitalism and creating communism.

At its best, the situationists' version of "anti-activism" was originally integrated into a holistic perspective of total revolution. Vaneigem moved further and further away from this integrated perspective and more towards something resembling lifestylist or individualist anarchism (hence his works, severed from their original context, become holy writ for a publication such as *Anarchy! Journal of Desire Armed*).

### Criticizing the Critique

It is for this reason that a few of the SI's more perceptive critics have seen the critique of the militant as one of the weaker aspects of the SI's overall theory. Gilles Dauvé, in his "Critique of the Situationist International," is particularly sensitive to the hidden elitism in the SI's critique of the militant. In *The Revolution in Everyday Life*, writes Dauvé, Vaneigem has produced "*a treatise on how to live differently* in the present world while setting forth what social relations could be. It is a handbook to violating the logic of the market and the wage system wherever one can get away with it." But, Dauvé argues, this perspective becomes a form of moralism:

capitalism. For example, vigorous campaigning by animal rights activists has succeeded in wrecking both Consort dog breeders and Hillgrove Farm cat breeders. The businesses were ruined and went into receivership. Similarly the campaign waged against arch-vivisectionists Huntingdon Life Sciences succeeded in reducing their share price by 33%, but the company just about managed to survive by running a desperate PR campaign in the City to pick up prices.[1] Activism can very successfully accomplish bringing down a business, yet to bring down capitalism a lot more will be required than to simply extend this sort of activity to every business in every sector. Similarly with the targetting of butcher's shops by animal rights activists, the net result is probably only to aid the supermarkets in closing down all the small butcher's shops, thus assisting the process of competition and the 'natural selection' of the marketplace. Thus activists often succeed in destroying one small business while strengthening capital overall.

A similar thing applies with anti-roads activism. Wide-scale anti-roads protests have created opportunities for a whole new sector of capitalism--security, surveillance, tunnellers, climbers, experts and consultants. We are now one 'market risk' among others to be taken into account when bidding for a roads contract. We may have actually assisted the rule of market forces, by forcing out the companies that are weakest and least able to cope. Protest-bashing consultant Amanda Webster says: "The advent of the protest movement will actually provide market advantages to those contractors who can handle it effectively." [2] Again activism can bring down a business or stop a road but capitalism carries merrily on, if anything stronger than before.

These things are surely an indication, if one were needed, that tackling capitalism will require not only a quantitative change (more actions, more activists) but a qualitative one (we need to discover some more effective form of operating). It seems we have very little idea of what it might actually require to bring down capitalism. As if all it needed was some sort of critical mass of activists occupying offices to be reached and then we'd have a revolution...

The form of activism has been preserved even while the content of this activity has moved beyond the form that contains it. We still think in terms of being 'activists' doing a 'campaign' on an 'issue', and because we are 'direct action' activists we will go and 'do an action' against our target. The method of campaigning against specific developments or single companies has been carried over into this new thing of taking on capitalism. We're attempting to take on capitalism and conceptualising what we're doing in completely inappropriate terms, utilising a method of operating appropriate to liberal reformism. So we have the bizarre spectacle of 'doing an action' against capitalism--an utterly inadequate practice.

## Roles

The role of the 'activist' is a role we adopt just like that of policeman, parent or priest--a strange psychological form we use to define ourselves and our relation to others. The 'activist' is a specialist or an expert in social change--yet the harder we cling to this role and notion of what we are, the more we actually impede the change we desire. A real revolution will involve the breaking out of all preconceived roles and the destruction of all specialism--the reclamation of our lives. The seizing control over our own destinies which is the act of revolution will involve the creation of new selves and new forms of interaction and community. 'Experts' in anything can only hinder this.

The Situationist International developed a stringent critique of roles and particularly the role of 'the militant'. Their criticism was mainly directed against leftist and social-democratic ideologies because that was mainly what they encountered. Although these forms of alienation still exist and are plain to be seen, in our particular milieu it is the liberal activist we encounter more often than the leftist militant. Nevertheless, they share many features in common (which of course is not surprising).

The Situationist Raoul Vaneigem defined roles like this: "Stereotypes are the dominant images of a period... The stereotype is the model of the role; the role is a model form of behaviour. The repetition of an attitude creates a role." To play a role is to cultivate an appearance to the neglect of everything authentic: "we succumb to the seduction of borrowed attitudes." As role-players we dwell in inauthenticity--reducing our lives to a string of clichés--"breaking [our] day down into a series of poses chosen more or less unconsciously from the range of dominant stereotypes." [3] This process has been at work since the early days of the anti-roads movement. At Twyford Down after Yellow Wednesday in December '92, press and media coverage focused on the Dongas Tribe and the dreadlocked countercultural aspect of the protests. Initially this was by no means the predominant element--there was a large group of ramblers at the eviction for example. [4] But people attracted to Twyford by the media coverage thought every single person there had dreadlocks. The media coverage had the effect of making 'ordinary' people stay away and more dreadlocked countercultural types turned up--decreasing the diversity of the protests. More recently, a similar thing has happened in the way in which people drawn to protest sites by the coverage of Swampy they had seen on TV began to replicate in their own lives the attitudes presented by the media as characteristic of the role of the 'eco-warrior'. [5]

"Just as the passivity of the consumer is an active passivity, so the passivity of the spectator lies in his ability to assimilate roles and play them according to

life," a misplaced belief that, somewhere on the other side of a great divide, "real" workers are somehow leading less alienated and more authentic lives.

Andrew X's argument relies on this dichotomy between "real" or "ordinary" people on one side and "alienated" activists on the other. He writes, "Our activity should be the immediate expression of a real struggle, not the affirmation of separateness and distinctness of a particular group." Citing Raoul Vaneigem, Andrew X says that "as role-players we dwell in inauthenticity." Further on he adapts one of the situationists' central ideas: "You cannot fight alienation with alienated means."

Much of this does indeed come from situationist critique of the self-sacrificing militant. Placed in its proper context, there is much of value in this aspect of the situationists' work. It usefully criticizes the residual christianity of much of the left, the martyr syndrome that guilt-trips others into becoming passive followers. The critique includes a refusal of the self-denying work-ethic, and it attempts to formulate (with necessarily limited success) some kind of resistance to the specialization, separation, and alienation that are endemic to spectacular capitalism.

Certainly no one engaged in trying to bring down capitalism should be doing so because they "should," because it is their "duty"; nor should they be doing so "for others." They should engage in this fight first and foremost *for themselves*, for their own radical pleasure and as an outlet for their love and rage.

But there are two related points about this aspect of situationist theory that I would like to make. The first is that this was part of a *total (and totalizing) critique and practice*, one which respected the unity of theory and practice and the necessity of theory as well as (and in constant interaction with) practice. [4] The second is that, when *removed* from this context which I am calling "total critique," the Vaneigem refusal of the role of the alienated militant can become both puerile and elitist (which is indeed what happened with Vaneigem himself).

Let me draw the reader's attention to something Vaneigem himself wrote in "Basic Banalities (I)" (*Situationist International* #7, 1962), several years before the publication of *Revolution in Everyday Life*. In this passage ("thesis" #12), Vaneigem addresses the essential *falseness* and *alienation* of the individual's "private life" under capitalism:

"Private" life is defined primarily in a formal context. It is, to be sure, engendered by the social relations created by private appropriation, but its essential form is determined by the expression of those relations. Universal,



Cops and priests, activists and intellectuals--doing away with all of these social groups will be the collective work of oppressed people acting in their own interests. "Activists" can help or hinder this process in varying degrees (and let's not overestimate their ability to do either), but what they *cannot* do is simply *wish or will themselves out of existence* as a social category.

The "role" of the activist is not simply "self-imposed"; it is also *socially-imposed*. Capitalist society produces activists the way it produces other specialists, the way it produces, for example, that close cousin of the activist, the intellectual. The efforts of some individual activists to commit "role-suicide" will not put a significant dent in the overall existence of activists as a social group. Andrew X, throughout his argument, returns again and again to the central insight that capital is a social relation. Well, as someone once said, you can't blow up a social relation. And if you can't blow it up, you certainly can't wish or will it away. Activists, like intellectuals and other specialists, will not disappear from society until the division of labor itself disappears.

I'm not arguing that we should all just sit tight and wait until "after the revolution." Such "objectivism" would be nothing more than the flip-side of Andrew X's subjectivism. It would foster only fatalism and passivity, waiting for the revolutionary dawn for any chance of human dignity and putting up with all kinds of alienating crap until that time (which would then be sure never to arrive).

Instead, I think we should try to get beyond both a simplistic "subjectivism" and a simplistic "objectivism." What's needed, I think, is to keep both the subjective and the objective poles of this problem in mind and *sustain the contradiction* (i.e., *live* the contradiction in all its painful ambiguity and antagonism) throughout one's theoretical and practical activity rather than one-sidedly suppressing either of its extremes.

### **Nobody Here But Us Workers?**

I think that Andrew X's voluntarist approach to abolishing activism (individually "wishing/willing" a social relation out of existence) points towards a false contrast between "inauthentic" activism and some imagined form of "authenticity"--a fantasy of non-alienation--which has an incipiently elitist dimension. It represents, in fact, a "return of the repressed" of the elitism that Andrew X tried to exorcise in the first place.

If this were a strictly individual "tic" of the author's, there wouldn't be much cause for worry. But the anti-theoretical (or at least *a*-theoretical) bias of many anti-activists goes hand in hand with this sentimentalization of "real, popular

official norms. The repetition of images and stereotypes offers a set of models from which everyone is supposed to choose a role." [6] The role of the militant or activist is just one of these roles, and therein, despite all the revolutionary rhetoric that goes with the role, lies its ultimate conservatism.

The supposedly revolutionary activity of the activist is a dull and sterile routine--a constant repetition of a few actions with no potential for change. Activists would probably resist change if it came because it would disrupt the easy certainties of their role and the nice little niche they've carved out for themselves. Like union bosses, activists are eternal representatives and mediators. In the same way as union leaders would be against their workers actually succeeding in their struggle because this would put them out of a job, the role of the activist is threatened by change. Indeed revolution, or even any real moves in that direction, would profoundly upset activists by depriving them of their role. If *\*everyone\** is becoming revolutionary then you're not so special anymore, are you?

So why do we behave like activists? Simply because it's the easy cowards' option? It is easy to fall into playing the activist role because it fits into this society and doesn't challenge it--activism is an accepted form of dissent. Even if as activists we are doing things which are not accepted and are illegal, the form of activism itself the way it is like a job--means that it fits in with our psychology and our upbringing. It has a certain attraction precisely because it is not revolutionary.

### **We Don't Need Any More Martyrs**

The key to understanding both the role of the militant and the activist is self-sacrifice--the sacrifice of the self to 'the cause' which is seen as being separate from the self. This of course has nothing to do with real revolutionary activity which is the seizing of the self. Revolutionary martyrdom goes together with the identification of some cause separate from one's own life--an action against capitalism which identifies capitalism as 'out there' in the City is fundamentally mistaken--the real power of capital is right here in our everyday lives--we recreate its power every day because capital is not a thing but a social relation between people (and hence classes) mediated by things.

Of course I am not suggesting that everyone who was involved in June 18th shares in the adoption of this role and the self-sacrifice that goes with it to an equal extent. As I said above, the problem of activism was made particularly apparent by June 18th precisely because it was an attempt to break from these roles and our normal ways of operating. Much of what is outlined here is a 'worst case scenario' of what playing the role of an activist can lead to. The

extent to which we can recognise this within our own movement will give us an indication of how much work there is still to be done.

The activist makes politics dull and sterile and drives people away from it, but playing the role also fucks up the activist herself. The role of the activist creates a separation between ends and means: self-sacrifice means creating a division between the revolution as love and joy in the future but duty and routine now. The worldview of activism is dominated by guilt and duty because the activist is not fighting for herself but for a separate cause: "All causes are equally inhuman." [7]

As an activist you have to deny your own desires because your political activity is defined such that these things do not count as 'politics'. You put 'politics' in a separate box to the rest of your life--it's like a job... you do 'politics' 9-5 and then go home and do something else. Because it is in this separate box, 'politics' exists unhampered by any real-world practical considerations of effectiveness. The activist feels obliged to keep plugging away at the same old routine unthinkingly, unable to stop or consider, the main thing being that the activist is kept busy and assuages her guilt by banging her head against a brick wall if necessary.

Part of being revolutionary might be knowing when to stop and wait. It might be important to know how and when to strike for maximum effectiveness and also how and when NOT to strike. Activists have this 'We must do something NOW!' attitude that seems fuelled by guilt. This is completely untactical.

The self-sacrifice of the militant or the activist is mirrored in their power over others as an expert--like a religion there is a kind of hierarchy of suffering and self-righteousness. The activist assumes power over others by virtue of her greater degree of suffering ('non-hierarchical' activist groups in fact form a 'dictatorship of the most committed'). The activist uses moral coercion and guilt to wield power over others less experienced in the theogony of suffering. Their subordination of themselves goes hand in hand with their subordination of others--all enslaved to 'the cause'. Self-sacrificing politicians stunt their own lives and their own will to live--this generates a bitterness and an antipathy to life which is then turned outwards to wither everything else. They are "great despisers of life... the partisans of absolute self-sacrifice... their lives twisted by their monstrous asceticism." [8] We can see this in our own movement, for example on site, in the antagonism between the desire to sit around and have a good time versus the guilt-tripping build/fortify/barricade work ethic and in the sometimes excessive passion with which 'lunchouts' are denounced. The self-sacrificing martyr is offended and outraged when she sees others that are not sacrificing themselves. Like when the 'honest worker' attacks the scrounger

if they engage in theoretical reflection and debate. And, anyway, "ordinary" workers don't do theory, right?

At least that's how activists think about workers. But Marx was pleased that the first French translation of *Capital* was going to appear in serial form because he thought this would make it more affordable for "ordinary" workers, who would then be more likely to read it. Obviously Marx didn't think it was beyond their capacities, nor that its contents were irrelevant to their everyday struggles.

Perhaps Andrew X's inability to identify theory as the real weakness of the activist movement measures the extent to which the author of "Give Up Activism" remains himself locked in the "activist mentality." This timidity about theory is a hidden carry-over from activism which still afflicts many of those who are trying to break with activism.

The kind of theory I have in mind can be found, for example, in various examples of "class composition" analysis, including the works of Sergio Bologna, the earlier Tony Negri, and the Midnight Notes collective, Loren Goldner's *The Remaking of the U.S. Working Class*, or, more recently, Kolinko's investigations of call centers in Germany and Curtis Price's article, "Fragile Prosperity? Fragile Social Peace? Notes on the U.S." (the last two published in the latest *Collective Action Notes*). [3] One of the first examples of "class composition" theory may have been Frederick Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1845.

### You Can't Blow Up a Social Relation

These analyses are a far cry from the economic determinism of much Marxist "theory." It's from the perspective of this kind of class-composition analysis that I speak of the "historical necessity" which conditions the existence of social groups. This necessity is, ultimately, *humanly-generated*, but it appears in an alienated form because it is hijacked by capitalist commodity production. We are not the slaves of impersonal forces--the "economy" or whatever. But nevertheless, the collective human dynamic by which social groups and professions (cops, priests, or activists) emerge out of the division of labor cannot be denied or thrown over by acts of *individual will*, which is the level at which Andrew X addresses the problem.

I fully believe in the ability of people collectively to change the conditions of their lives in the most radical ways. But to abolish specific social groups such as activists requires a serious theoretical as well as practical attempt to come to grips with and intervene in the *whole social process* that creates them in the first place, rather than simply urging individual activists to "give up" their role.

come, their numbers will be submerged within it, not as functioning organizations, but as individual workers.

### X-Ray Specs

However, there's also the question of just what sorts of things constitute "struggle." From an "activist" perspective, no doubt such things as bigger and rowdier "carnivals against capital" and ever more militant and dramatic public demonstrations signify evidence of what Andrew X calls "a general upsurge of struggle." But this perspective overlooks a whole layer of more "everyday" forms of resistance - from slacking off, absenteeism, and sabotage, to shopfloor "counter-planning" and other forms of autonomous and "unofficial" organizing - which conventional activists and leftists (including most anarchists) have a bad track record of acknowledging. And this still leaves out all of those modes of struggle which take place beyond the shopfloor, such as various forms of cultural and sexual revolution. Maybe in such places we can find the groundwork of the class power and solidarity that burst forth during the periods of "general upsurge of struggle."

Furthermore, for different groups of workers, there are very specific forms of "everyday" resistance and autonomous organizing which have a close relationship with the very specific ways that surplus value is being extracted from their labor. Perhaps, then, the first steps towards a genuine anti-activism would be to turn towards these specific, everyday, ongoing struggles. How are the so-called "ordinary" workers resisting capitalism at this time? What opportunities are *already* there in their concrete struggles? What networks are *already* being built through their own efforts?

Having a perspective which recognizes this and even orients towards it requires something which doesn't get much mention in Andrew X's article: the need for a *theory* to go with one's practice, a theory that can *think the "subjective" and "objective" simultaneously*, seeing them in all their mutually-conditioning relatedness. In his entire critique of the J18 movement, Andrew X never seems to consider that its inadequacies might be attributed, in part or whole, to the weakness (or outright absence) of its *analysis*. [2]

We all know that one of the main characteristics of the traditional activist is a disdain for theory--they aren't called *activists* for nothing. We've all heard from those who want to "get on with it" and "build something" or "do something" rather than waste time niggling and nit-picking over something as irrelevant as theory. This is particularly prominent in the United States, where traditional anti-intellectualism (a deeply conservative ideological force in this society) makes activists insecure they'll sound like elitists or petty-bourgeois academics

or the layabout with such vitriol, we know it is actually because she hates her job and the martyrdom she has made of her life and therefore hates to see anyone escape this fate, hates to see anyone enjoying themselves while she is suffering--she must drag everyone down into the muck with her--an equality of self-sacrifice.

In the old religious cosmology, the successful martyr went to heaven. In the modern worldview, successful martyrs can look forwards to going down in history. The greatest self-sacrifice, the greatest success in creating a role (or even better, in devising a whole new one for people to emulate--e.g. the eco-warrior) wins a reward in history--the bourgeois heaven.

The old left was quite open in its call for heroic sacrifice: "Sacrifice yourselves joyfully, brothers and sisters! For the Cause, for the Established Order, for the Party, for Unity, for Meat and Potatoes!" [9] But these days it is much more veiled: Vaneigem accuses "young leftist radicals" of "enter[ing] the service of a Cause--the 'best' of all Causes. The time they have for creative activity they squander on handing out leaflets, putting up posters, demonstrating or heckling local politicians. They become militants, fetishising action because others are doing their thinking for them." [10]

This resounds with us--particularly the thing about the fetishising of action--in left groups the militants are left free to engage in endless busywork because the group leader or guru has the 'theory' down pat, which is just accepted and lapped up--the 'party line'. With direct action activists it's slightly different--action is fetishised, but more out of an aversion to any theory whatsoever.

Although it is present, that element of the activist role which relies on self-sacrifice and duty was not so significant in June 18th. What is more of an issue for us is the feeling of separateness from 'ordinary people' that activism implies. People identify with some weird sub-culture or clique as being 'us' as opposed to the 'them' of everyone else in the world.

### Isolation

The activist role is a self-imposed isolation from all the people we should be connecting to. Taking on the role of an activist separates you from the rest of the human race as someone special and different. People tend to think of their own first person plural (who are you referring to when you say 'we?') as referring to some community of activists, rather than a class. For example, for some time now in the activist milieu it has been popular to argue for 'no more single issues' and for the importance of 'making links'. However, many people's conception of what this involved was to 'make links' with \*other activists\* and

other campaign groups. June 18th demonstrated this quite well, the whole idea being to get all the representatives of all the various different causes or issues in one place at one time, voluntarily relegating ourselves to the ghetto of good causes.

Similarly, the various networking forums that have recently sprung up around the country--the Rebel Alliance in Brighton, NASA in Nottingham, Riotous Assembly in Manchester, the London Underground etc. have a similar goal--to get all the activist groups in the area talking to each other. I'm not knocking this--it is an essential pre-requisite for any further action, but it should be recognised for the extremely limited form of 'making links' that it is. It is also interesting in that what the groups attending these meetings have in common is that they are activist groups--what they are actually concerned with seems to be a secondary consideration.

It is not enough merely to seek to link together all the activists in the world, neither is it enough to seek to transform more people into activists. Contrary to what some people may think, we will not be any closer to a revolution if lots and lots of people become activists. Some people seem to have the strange idea that what is needed is for everyone to be somehow persuaded into becoming activists like us and then we'll have a revolution. Vaneigem says: "Revolution is made everyday despite, and in opposition to, the specialists of revolution." [11]

The militant or activist is a specialist in social change or revolution. The specialist recruits others to her own tiny area of specialism in order to increase her own power and thus dispel the realisation of her own powerlessness. "The specialist... enrolls himself in order to enroll others." [12] Like a pyramid selling scheme, the hierarchy is self-replicating--you are recruited and in order not to be at the bottom of the pyramid, you have to recruit more people to be under you, who then do exactly the same. The reproduction of the alienated society of roles is accomplished through specialists.

Jacques Camatte in his essay 'On Organization' (1969) [13] makes the astute point that political groupings often end up as "gangs" defining themselves by exclusion--the group member's first loyalty becomes to the group rather than to the struggle. His critique applies especially to the myriad of Left sects and groupuscules at which it was directed but it applies also to a lesser extent to the activist mentality.

The political group or party substitutes itself for the proletariat and its own survival and reproduction become paramount--revolutionary activity becomes synonymous with 'building the party' and recruiting members. The group takes

of cops (i.e., every state *needs* cops; only a stateless society will not need them). Individual "choice" plays a part in these processes, but these choices are always made within highly constrained and conditioned circumstances. We can't get rid of cops by making a moral appeal to the police to abandon their cop "roles."

I'm sure that Andrew X does not believe this about the police; my point is that he loses this perspective when thinking about activism and activists. I also realize that Andrew X does not blithely assert that all the problems of activism will be magically solved by a simple "change of heart." Indeed, by the end of his article Andrew X acknowledges the objective difficulties of his case, but in a way that is simply not integrated into the main body of his "subjectivist" argument.

In the article's concluding paragraphs, the author speculates that we find ourselves in times in which radical politics is often the product of mutual weakness and isolation. If this is the case, it may not even be within our power to break out of the role of activists. It may be that in times of a downturn in struggle, those who continue to work for social revolution become marginalised and come to be seen (and to see themselves) as a special separate group of people. It may be that this is only capable of being corrected by a general upsurge in struggle when we won't be weirdos and freaks any more but will seem simply to be stating what is on everybody's minds.

I would say that there's no "maybe" about the fact that groups espousing "revolutionary" politics find themselves in a marginalized minority during periods when class struggle is at low ebb. Thus, to a certain extent, it is something that can be anticipated and dealt with without the need for much hand-wringing and soul-searching.

Such has been, for example, the position of many council communists and left communists, who recognized the necessarily minoritarian character of their existence throughout this century's middle decades. An article by Sam Moss entitled "The Impotence of the Revolutionary Group," published in the council communist publication *International Council Correspondence* in the 1930s, is representative of this point of view. In the article Moss writes:

The working class alone can wage the revolutionary struggle even as it is today waging alone the non-revolutionary class struggle, and the reason that the rebellious class conscious workers band into groups outside the spheres of the real class struggle is only that there is as yet no revolutionary movement within them. Their existence as small groups, therefore, reflects, not a situation for revolution, but rather a non-revolutionary situation. When the revolution does

the role of an activist separates you from the rest of the human race as someone special and different©\*\*

The author seems more interested in how individual activists *see and experience themselves* than in *what position they actually occupy in society*. Activists suffer from a *feeling* of separateness, they *identify* with cliques, their isolation is *self-imposed*, their roles are *taken on*, etc. This rhetoric runs throughout the critique, representing its predominant point of view. Certainly Andrew X considers the consequences of these attitudes, such as the tendency to self-serving recruitment to raise one's own level within the group, the reproduction within the group of the oppressive structures of the larger society, isolation of activists from the larger communities of the oppressed, and ultimately the recuperation of struggles back into capitalist social relations. But given the author's emphasis on the subjective side of the equation, these consequences come across as the secondary effects of a primary cause: individuals assuming the stereotyped and elitist attitudes of the "activist" role.

The critique's greatest weakness is this one-sided emphasis on the "subjective" side of the social phenomenon of activism. The emphasis points to an obvious conclusion implicit throughout Andrew X's argument: If activism is a mental attitude or "role," it may be changed, as one change's one's mind, or thrown off, like a mask or a costume. The author warns us that "the harder we cling to this role and notion of who we are, the more we actually impede the change we desire." The implication is clear: cease to cling, let go of the role, "give up activism," and a significant impediment to desired change will be removed.

This subjectivist emphasis leads the author to advance some fairly questionable formulations, in particular the following: "The role of the 'activist' is a role we adopt just like that of policeman, parent or priest - a strange psychological form we use to define ourselves and our relation to others." I don't doubt that being part of the armed fist of the bourgeois state carries with it a psychological "role" that the individual cop "identifies" with, but from any kind of perspective that seriously wants to get rid of cops (and the state) altogether, this has got to be a pretty trivial consideration. The author has slipped here into a bourgeois, individualist way of viewing the question, in which social groups such as cops, parents, and priests come about because some aggregate of individual people have "chosen" to become them (in the "free marketplace of roles," no doubt).

### Hitting the Wall

Social groups of whatever kind--be they cops, priests, and parents, or anarchists and activists--come into existence through complicated social processes. There is a powerful element of *historical necessity* in the existence

itself to have a unique grasp on truth and everyone outside the group is treated like an idiot in need of education by this vanguard. Instead of an equal debate between comrades we get instead the separation of theory and propaganda, where the group has its own theory, which is almost kept secret in the belief that the inherently less mentally able punters must be lured in the organisation with some strategy of populism before the politics are sprung on them by surprise. This dishonest method of dealing with those outside of the group is similar to a religious cult--they will never tell you upfront what they are about.

We can see here some similarities with activism, in the way that the activist milieu acts like a leftist sect. Activism as a whole has some of the characteristics of a "gang". Activist gangs can often end up being cross-class alliances, including all sorts of liberal reformists because they too are 'activists'. People think of themselves primarily as activists and their primary loyalty becomes to the community of activists and not to the struggle as such. The "gang" is illusory community, distracting us from creating a wider community of resistance. The essence of Camatte's critique is an attack on the creation of an interior/exterior division between the group and the class. We come to think of ourselves as being activists and therefore as being separate from and having different interests from the mass of working class people.

Our activity should be the immediate expression of a real struggle, not the affirmation of the separateness and distinctness of a particular group. In Marxist groups the possession of 'theory' is the all-important thing determining power--it's different in the activist milieu, but not that different--the possession of the relevant 'social capital'--knowledge, experience, contacts, equipment etc. is the primary thing determining power.

Activism reproduces the structure of this society in its operations: "When the rebel begins to believe that he is fighting for a higher good, the authoritarian principle gets a filip." [14] This is no trivial matter, but is at the basis of capitalist social relations. Capital is a social relation between people mediated by things--the basic principle of alienation is that we live our lives in the service of some \*thing\* that we ourselves have created. If we reproduce this structure in the name of politics that declares itself anti-capitalist, we have lost before we have begun. You cannot fight alienation by alienated means.

### A Modest Proposal

This is a modest proposal that we should develop ways of operating that are adequate to our radical ideas. This task will not be easy and the writer of this short piece has no clearer insight into how we should go about this than anyone else. I am not arguing that June 18th should have been abandoned or

attacked, indeed it was a valiant attempt to get beyond our limitations and to create something better than what we have at present. However, in its attempts to break with antique and formulaic ways of doing things it has made clear the ties that still bind us to the past. The criticisms of activism that I have expressed above do not all apply to June 18th. However there is a certain paradigm of activism which at its worst includes all that I have outlined above and June 18th shared in this paradigm to a certain extent. To exactly what extent is for you to decide.

Activism is a form partly forced upon us by weakness. Like the joint action taken by Reclaim the Streets and the Liverpool dockers--we find ourselves in times in which radical politics is often the product of mutual weakness and isolation. If this is the case, it may not even be within our power to break out of the role of activists. It may be that in times of a downturn in struggle, those who continue to work for social revolution become marginalised and come to be seen (and to see themselves) as a special separate group of people. It may be that this is only capable of being corrected by a general upsurge in struggle when we won't be weirdos and freaks any more but will seem simply to be stating what is on everybody's minds. However, to work to escalate the struggle it will be necessary to break with the role of activists to whatever extent is possible--to constantly try to push at the boundaries of our limitations and constraints.

Historically, those movements that have come the closest to de-stabilising or removing or going beyond capitalism have not at all taken the form of activism. Activism is essentially a political form and a method of operating suited to liberal reformism that is being pushed beyond its own limits and used for revolutionary purposes. The activist role in itself must be problematic for those who desire social revolution.

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## Notes

[1] **Squaring up to the Square Mile: A Rough Guide to the City of London** (J18 Publications (UK), 1999) p. 8

[2] see 'Direct Action: Six Years Down the Road' in **Do or Die** No. 7, p. 3

inappropriate terms, utilising a method of operating appropriate to liberal reformism. So we have the bizarre spectacle of 'doing an action' against capitalism - an utterly inadequate practice.

In the main, however, "Give Up Activism" is taken up with a critique of what the author labels "the activist mentality," and it's here that the argument's greatest weaknesses are to be found. Activism, I would argue, has both a "subjective" and an "objective" dimension, and both need to be taken into account. Andrew X himself acknowledges the "objective" side of activism in the opening of his critique, observing:

Activism, like all expert roles, has its basis in the division of labour--it is a specialised separate task. The division of labour is the foundation of class society, the fundamental division being that between mental and manual labour. The division of labour operates, for example, in medicine or education--instead of healing and bringing up kids being common knowledge and tasks that everyone has a hand in, this knowledge becomes the specialised property of doctors and teachers--experts that we must rely on to do these things for us. Experts jealously guard and mystify the skills they have. This keeps people separated and disempowered and reinforces hierarchical class society.

After this, however, the "objective side" of activism as a concrete social and historical phenomenon is relegated to the background (at least until the author bumps up against it again in the concluding paragraphs), and the "subjective side"--the cast of mind, attitudes, and beliefs of the individual activist, the "activist mentality"--takes center stage.

## Going Mental

The activist, writes Andrew X, "identifies with what they do and thinks of it as their role in life, like a job or career . . . it becomes an essential part of their self-image." According to the author, the activist's specialized self-image inevitably brings with it a sense of "being somehow privileged or more advanced than others in your appreciation of the need for social change, in the knowledge of how to achieve it and as leading or being in the forefront of the practical struggle to create this change."

Later on the author writes that the biggest problem confronting the activist "is the feeling of separateness from 'ordinary people' that activism implies. People identify with some weird sub-culture or clique as being 'us' as opposed to the 'them' of everyone else in the world." He continues, "The activist role is a self-imposed isolation from all the people we should be connecting to. Taking on

*operating in the more or less conventional mode of direct-action activism. Will efforts such as NEFAC be able to offer something useful to those in struggle, or do such efforts lead only to the dead-end of "activism for activism's sake" and the spectacle of militancy?*

*Andrew X offers "Give Up Activism," as, in his words, "an attempt to inspire some thought on the challenges that confront us if we are really serious in our intention of doing away with the capitalist mode of production." It is an attempt to open the debate rather than to be conclusive, and it's in the same spirit that I offer these remarks. No doubt some readers will find my position frustratingly ambivalent, but I hope that this is not simply the result of confused thinking on my part. Rather, I think that a rather high degree of ambivalence and the ability to live the tension of seemingly irreconcilable contradictions is central to the problems of formulating an "anti-activism" and "anti-politics." In short, I argue that we must embrace simultaneously the necessity and the impossibility of "giving up activism."*

### **The Limits of Activism**

There is much of value in Andrew X's critique, particularly the points raised in the "form and content" section. In this section the author points out the limits of conventional activism when applied outside of the context of single-issue campaigns. Such activism, writes Andrew X, is totally useless for the task of bringing down capitalism as a whole. "Activism can very successfully accomplish bringing down a business, yet to bring down capitalism a lot more will be required than to simply extend this sort of activity to every business in every sector." In other words, capitalism won't be brought down by the mere quantitative addition of "actions" (or the number of activists); instead, a *qualitative* transformation of some kind is required.

Andrew X also shows how even the purported "successes" of single-issue activist campaigns are open to recuperation by capitalism, for example by helping the bosses figure out better ways to stifle opposition or by assisting "the rule of market forces" in driving weaker companies out of business. The section's conclusion merits quotation in full:

The form of activism has been preserved even while the content of this activity has moved beyond the form that contains it. We still think in terms of being 'activists' doing a 'campaign' on an 'issue', and because we are 'direct action' activists we will go and 'do an action' against our target. The method of campaigning against specific developments or single companies has been carried over into this new thing of taking on capitalism. We're attempting to take on capitalism and conceptualising what we're doing in completely

[3] Raoul Vaneigem - **The Revolution of Everyday Life**, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Left Bank Books/Rebel Press, 1994) - first published 1967, pp. 131-3

[4] see 'The Day they Drove Twyford Down' in **Do or Die** No. 1, p. 11

[5] see 'Personality Politics: The Spectacularisation of Fairmile' in **Do or Die** No. 7, p. 35

[6] **Op. Cit.** 2, p. 128

[7] **Op. Cit.** 2, p. 107

[8] **Op. Cit.** 2, p. 109

[9] **Op. Cit.** 2, p. 108

[10] **Op. Cit.** 2, p. 109

[11] **Op. Cit.** 2, p. 111

[12] **Op. Cit.** 2, p. 143

[13] Jacques Camatte - 'On Organization' (1969) in **This World We Must Leave and Other Essays** (New York, Autonomedia, 1995)

[14] **Op. Cit.** 2, p. 110



# THE NECESSITY AND IMPOSSIBILITY OF ANTI-ACTIVISM

*For my part, I do not believe there is 'one solution' to the social problems, but a thousand different and changing solutions in the same way as social existence is different and varied in time and space.*

*--Errico Malatesta, 1924*

*Revolution is the communising of society, but this process is more than just the sum of direct actions.*

*--Gilles Dauvé, 1973*

*This article responds to issues raised in "Give Up Activism," a critique of the J18 protests in England by Andrew X. "Give Up Activism" has been getting some attention lately on this side of the Atlantic: the editor of Red & Black Notes brought it to my attention some time after it had been posted on the Mid-Atlantic Infoshop's webpage of J18 critiques, and it was also reprinted in the latest Collective Action Notes.[1]*

*I think there are two main reasons for the article's timeliness. The first is the sense of "diminishing returns" which have followed the sequence of "post-Seattle" protests, from A16 in DC to the Republican and Democratic national conventions in Philly and LA. There's a feeling afoot that what was new and striking about Seattle might now be growing a little old and stale--not to mention thoroughly anticipated by the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state. The second reason, a little closer to home, is the formation of the NorthEastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists (NEFAC), which appears to be*



complement whatever practical contribution to current workers' struggles we may feel able to make. In both the possible scenarios outlined above we continue to act more or less within the activist role. But hopefully in both of these different scenarios we would be able to reject the mental identification with the role of activism and actively try to go beyond our status as activists to whatever extent is possible.

# GIVE UP ACTIVISM: POSTSCRIPT

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## Notes

[1] 'The Necessity and Impossibility of Anti-Activism', *The Bad Days Will End!*, No. 3. p.4.

[2] *The Bad Days Will End!*, p.5

[3] Gilles Dauvé (Jean Barrot) - 'Critique of the Situationist International' in *What is Situationism? - A Reader*, Ed. Stewart Home (AK Press, 1996), p.35

[4] See 'Whatever happened to the Situationists?', *Aufheben* No. 6, p.45

[5] *The Bad Days Will End!*, p.6

[6] The Kolinko proposal was recently published in *Collective Action Notes* No. 16-17 and is also available on the web at: [http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/index\\_e.htm](http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/index_e.htm) [ Updated 4 March 2002: [http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/engl/e\\_koidx.htm](http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/engl/e_koidx.htm) ]

*Many of the articles printed in the Reflections on June 18th pamphlet repeated almost to the onset of tedium that capitalism is a social relation and isn't just to do with big banks, corporations or international financial institutions. It's an important point and worth making, but 'Give up Activism' had other fish to fry.*

*Therefore the conclusion reached by these other articles was the point of departure for this one - if it is true that capitalism is a social relation based in production and in the relations between classes then what implications does this have for our activity and for our method of attacking it? The basic kernel of the piece and the initial idea that inspired the writing of it is the 'Form and Content' section. It had occurred to many people that there was something a little odd about a 'day of action against capitalism'. The original inspiration behind the article was an attempt to pin down what it was that made the idea appear a little odd, incongruous, contradictory.*

*It seemed there was a similarity between the way we were carrying on acting like liberal activists campaigning against capitalism as if it was another single issue, another 'cause', and Vaneigem's critique of the leftist militant, whose politics consist of a set of duties carried out on behalf of an external 'cause'. It is true that the activist and the militant share this common factor, but it is about all they have in common. I made the mistake of carrying over all the other characteristics attributed by Vaneigem to 'the militant' and assigning them also to the activist, when they largely weren't appropriate. As a result, large sections of 'Give up Activism' come across as far too harsh and as an inaccurate representation of the direct action movement. The Situationists' characteristic bile was perhaps more appropriate when directed at leftist party hacks than as a description of the sort of politics involved around June 18th. The self-sacrifice, the martyrdom and guilt that Vaneigem identified as central to the politics of 'the militant' is much less a feature of direct action politics, which to the contrary is more usually criticised for the opposite failing of lifestyleism.*

As has been very neatly drawn out by an excellent critique in the American publication *The Bad Days Will End!*,<sup>[1]</sup> the original idea that motivated the writing of the article and this rehashing of Vaneigem, translating the critique of the leftist 'militant' into that of the liberal 'activist', are incongruously roped together to produce an article which is an unwieldy amalgam of the objective (What social situation are we in? What forms of action are appropriate?) and the subjective (Why do we feel like activists? Why do we have this mentality? Can we change the way we feel about ourselves?). It is not so much that the subjective aspect of activism is emphasised over the objective, but rather more that the very real problems that are identified with acting as activists come to be seen to be mere products of having this 'activist mentality'. 'Give up Activism' can then be read such that it seems to reverse cause and effect and to imply that if we simply 'give up' this mental role then the objective conditions will change too:

"[Give up Activism's] greatest weakness is this one-sided emphasis on the 'subjective' side of the social phenomenon of activism. The emphasis points to an obvious conclusion implicit throughout [the] argument: If activism is a mental attitude or 'role', it may be changed, as one changes one's mind, or thrown off, like a mask or a costume... The implication is clear: cease to cling, let go of the role, 'give up activism', and a significant impediment to the desired change will be removed."<sup>[2]</sup>

The article was of course never proposing that we could simply think ourselves out of the problem. It was intended merely to suggest that we might be able to remove an impediment and an illusion about our situation as one step towards challenging that situation, and from that point that we might start to discover a more effective and more appropriate way of acting.

It is now clear that the slipshod hitching of Vaneigem to a enquiry into what it was that was incongruous and odd in having a one-day action against capitalism was an error, prompted by an over-hasty appropriation of Situationist ideas, without considering how much of a connection there really was between them and the original idea behind the piece. The theory of roles is perhaps the weakest part of Vaneigem's ideas and in his 'Critique of the Situationist International', Gilles Dauvé even goes so far as to say: "Vaneigem was the weakest side of the SI, the one which reveals all its weaknesses".<sup>[3]</sup> This is probably a little harsh. But nevertheless, the sort of degeneration that Situationist ideas underwent after the post-1968 disintegration of the SI took the worst elements of Vaneigem's "radical subjectivity" as their starting point, in the poorest examples effectively degenerating into bourgeois individualism.<sup>[4]</sup> That it is this element of Situationist thought that has proven

at least we will be making it more possible for us to abolish activism altogether in the future.

One way of doing this is suggested in the critique in *The Bad Days Will End!*:

"Perhaps, then, the first steps towards a genuine anti-activism would be to turn towards these specific, everyday, ongoing struggles. How are the so-called 'ordinary' workers resisting capitalism at this time? What opportunities are *already* there in their ongoing struggles? What networks are *already* being built through their own efforts?"<sup>[5]</sup>

A current example of exactly this sort of thing is the investigation into call centres initiated by the German group Kolinko, which is mentioned in *The Bad Days Will End!* and was also contributed to in the recent *Undercurrent* No. 8.<sup>[6]</sup> The idea of this project is that call centres represent the 'new sweatshops' of the information economy and that if a new cycle of workers' resistance is to emerge anywhere then this might just be the place.

It is perhaps also worth considering that changing circumstances might work to our advantage - the restructuring of the welfare state is forcing more and more activists into work. For example the call centre enquiry project mentioned above could represent a good opportunity for us as call centres are exactly the sort of places where people forced off the dole end up working and exactly the sort of temporary and transient jobs in which those involved in the direct action movement end up working also. This certainly could help make the connection between capitalism and our own immediate needs, and perhaps might allow us to better participate in developing new fronts in the class struggle. Or the increased imposition of work could just end up with us even more fucked over than we are at present, which is obviously what the government are hoping. They are attempting to both have their cake and eat it - trying to turn the clock back and return to days of austerity and privation while gambling that the working class is so atomised and divided by twenty years of attacks that this will not provoke a return of the struggle that originally brought about the introduction of these amelioration measures in the first place. Only time will tell whether they are to be successful in their endeavour or whether we are to be successful in ours.

In conclusion, perhaps the best thing would be to try and adopt both of the above methods. We need to maintain our radicalism and commitment to direct action, not being afraid to take action as a minority. But equally, we can't just resign ourselves to remaining a small radical subculture and treading water while we wait for everyone else to make the revolutionary wave for us. We should also perhaps look at the potential for making our direct action

we can do is to continue to take radical action, to pursue politics that push things in the right direction and to try and drag along as many other people as possible, but basically to resign ourselves to that fact that we are going to continue to be a minority. So until the point when some sort of upturn in the class struggle occurs it's basically a holding operation. We can try and stop things getting worse, have a finger in the dam, try and strategically target weak points in the system where we think we can hit and have some effect, develop our theory, live our lives in as radical a way as possible, build a sustainable counter culture that can carry on doing these things in the long term... and hopefully when one day, events out of our control lead to a general radicalisation of society and an upturn in the class struggle we will be there ready to play some part and to contribute what things we have learnt and what skills we have developed as a radical subculture.

The flaw in this sort of approach is that it appears almost like another sort of 'automatic Marxism' - a term used to poke fun at those Marxists who thought that a revolution would happen when the contradictions between the forces and the relations of production had matured sufficiently, when the objective conditions were right, so that revolution almost seemed to be a process that happened without the need for any human involvement and you could just sit back and wait for it to happen. This sort of idea is a flaw carried over into ultra-left thinking. As is explained in *The Bad Days Will End!*, many ultra-left groups have recognised that in periods of downturn, they are necessarily going to be minorities and have argued against compensating for this with any kind of party-building or attempts to substitute their group for the struggle of the proletariat as a whole. Some ultra-left groups have taken this line of thinking to its logical conclusion and have ended up turning doing nothing into a political principle. Of course our response would not be to do nothing, but nevertheless, the point remains that if everyone similarly just waited for an upsurge to happen then it certainly never would. Effectively by just waiting for it to happen we are assuming that someone else will do it for us and maintaining a division between us and the 'ordinary' workers who will make this happen.

The alternative to this scenario is to stop thinking of the ebb and flow of the class struggle as like some force of nature that just comes and goes without us being able to effect it at all, and to start thinking about how to build class power and how to end the current disorganised and atomised state of workers in this country. The problem is that over the last twenty or so years, the social landscape of the country has changed so fast and so rapidly that it has caught us on the hop. Restructuring and relocation have fractured and divided people. We could try and help re-compose a new unity, instead of just being content with doing our bit and waiting for the upturn, to try and make this upturn happen. We will probably still be acting as activists, but to a lesser extent, and

*the most easily recuperable should give us pause for thought before too-readily taking it on board.*

### Revolution in Your Head

This over-emphasis in 'Give up Activism' on the theory of roles and on the subjective side of things has led some people to fail to recognise the original impetus behind the piece. This starting point and presupposition was perhaps not made clear enough, because some people seem to have assumed that the purpose of the article was to make some kind of point concerning individual psychological health. 'Give up Activism' was not intended to be an article about or an exercise in radical therapy. The main intention of the article, however inexpertly executed, was always to think about our collective activity - what we are doing and how we might do it better.

However, there was a point to the 'subjectivism' of the main part of the article. The reason why 'Give up Activism' was so concerned with our ideas and our mental image of ourselves is not because I thought that if we change our ideas then everything will be alright, but because I had *nothing to say* about our activity. This was very clearly a critique written from the inside and thus also a self-critique and I am still very much involved in 'activist' politics. As I made plain, I have not necessarily got any clearer idea than anyone else of how to go about developing new forms of action more appropriate to an 'anti-capitalist' perspective. June 18th was a valiant attempt to do just this, and 'Give up Activism' was not a criticism of the action on June 18th as such. I certainly couldn't have come up with anything much better myself.

Although the piece is called 'Give up Activism', I did not want to suggest *at all* that people stop trashing GM crops, smashing up the City and disrupting the gatherings of the rich and powerful, or any of the other myriad acts of resistance that 'activists' engage in. It was more the way we do these things and what we think we are doing when we do them that I was seeking to question. Because 'Give up Activism' had little or nothing to recommend in terms of objective practical activity, the emphasis on the subjective made it seem like I thought these problems existed *only* in our heads.

Of course, thinking of ourselves as activists and as belonging to a community of activists is no more than a recognition of the truth, and there is nothing pathological in that. The problem I was trying to make clear was the *identification* with the activist role - being happy as a radical minority. I intended to question the role, to make people dissatisfied with the role, even while they remained within it. It is only in this way that we stand a chance of escaping it.

Obviously we are constrained within our specific circumstances. During an ebb in the class struggle, revolutionaries are in even more of a minority than they are in any case. We probably don't have any choice about appearing as a strange subculture. But we do have a choice about our attitude to this situation, and if we come to ditch the mental identification with the role then we may discover that there is actually some room for manoeuvre within our activist role so that we can try and break from activist practice as far as we are able. The point is that challenging the 'subjective' element - our activist self-image - will at least be a step towards moving beyond the role in its 'objective' element also. As I said in 'Give up Activism', only with a general escalation of the class struggle will activists be able to completely ditch their role, but in the meantime: "to work to escalate the struggle it will be necessary to break with the role of activists to whatever extent is possible - to constantly try to push at the boundaries of our limitations and constraints." Which was precisely the point of the article.

For if we cannot even think beyond the role now, then what hope have we of ever escaping it? We should at the very least be dissatisfied with our position as a radical minority and be trying to generalise the struggle and make the necessary upturn happen. Doing away with the activist mentality is necessary but not sufficient for doing away with the role in practice.

### **Up the Workers!**

Although 'Give up Activism' neglected to recommend any actual change in behaviour outside of saying that we needed one, perhaps now it would be appropriate to say something about this. How can we bring 'politics' out of its separate box, as an external cause to which we dedicate ourselves?

Many of the criticisms of the direct action movement revolve around similar points. Capitalism is based on work; our struggles against it are not based on our work but quite the opposite, they are something we do outside whatever work we may do. Our struggles are not based on our direct needs (as for example, going on strike for higher wages); they seem disconnected, arbitrary. Our 'days of action' and so forth have no connection to any wider on-going struggle in society. We treat capitalism as if it was something external, ignoring our own relation to it. These points are repeated again and again in criticisms of the direct action movement (including 'Give up Activism' but also in many other places).

The problem is not necessarily that people don't understand that capital is a social relation and that it's to do with production as well as just banks and stock exchanges, here as well as in the Third World or that capital is a relation

between classes. The point is that even when all of this is understood our attitude to this is still as outsiders looking in, deciding at what point to attack this system. Our struggle against capitalism is not based on *our* relation to value-creation, to work. On the whole the people who make up the direct action movement occupy marginal positions within society as the unemployed, as students or working in various temporary and transitory jobs. We do not really inhabit the world of production, but exist largely in the realm of consumption and circulation. What unity the direct action movement possesses does not come from all working in the same occupation or living in the same area. It is a unity based on intellectual commitment to a set of ideas.

To a certain extent 'Give up Activism' was being disingenuous (as were many of the other critiques making similar points) in providing all these hints but never spelling out exactly where they led, which left the door open for them to be misunderstood. The author of the critique in *The Bad Days Will End!* was right to point out what the article was indicating but shied away from actually mentioning: the basic thing that's wrong with activism is that it isn't collective mass struggle by the working class at the point of production, which is the way that revolutions are *supposed* to happen.

The sort of activity that meets the criteria of all the criticisms - that is based on immediate needs, in a mass on-going struggle, in direct connection to our everyday lives and that does not treat capital as something external to us, is this working class struggle. It seems a little unfair to criticise the direct action movement for not being something that it cannot be and has never claimed to be, but nevertheless, if we want to move forward we've got to know what we're lacking.

The reason that this sort of working class struggle is the obvious answer to what we are lacking is that this is THE model of revolution that the last hundred years or so has handed down to us that we have to draw upon. However, the shadow of the failure of the workers' movement still hangs over us. And if this is not the model of how a revolution might happen, then what is? And no one has any very convincing answers to that question.

### **A Vociferous Minority**

So we are stuck with the question - what do we do as a radical minority that wants to create revolution in non-revolutionary times? The way I see it at the moment, we basically have two options. The first is to recognise that as a small scene of radicals we can have relatively little influence on the overall picture and that if and when an upsurge in the class struggle occurs it probably won't have much to do with us. Therefore until the mythical day arrives the best thing